



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

THE GREAT BRITISH HANDICAPPING DEBATE

IT IS not at all unusual for James Willoughby's articles and opinions to seem complicated to me at first sight. I think his brain just works a bit faster than most. He certainly reads and assimilates information much faster than anyone else I know. If I send him an article or even a scientific paper on which I want his opinion, the response sometimes comes almost immediately when I have been deliberating over it for hours or even days.

And so, typically, when I first read about his proposed alternative to the handicap system in last month's *Klarion*, I was a bit bamboozled by some of the detail and I thought that, like the current handicap system, it might be too confusing and off-putting to the average

racing fan and potential racing fan. I had to read it again and, when I did, I could grasp his logic and see how it would work.

I have read it again now and would urge you to do so as well if the subject interests you at all. It is not the system I would propose – mine would be based on division of classes based on prize-money won – but, if the BHA was to say it was scrapping handicaps tomorrow and moving to the Willoughby system, I'd be very happy.

I knew his article was likely to stimulate debate among our readers and help fill our 'Kickback' page and that has proved to be the case. We have printed a selection of letters including those from former *Timeform* Editor, Geoff Greetham, and retired trainer and

accomplished racing historian, Bill O'Gorman.

Sadly, in my opinion, these two former racing industry professionals

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have demonstrated the all-too-common inability to accept radical change and let go of the archaic system that is the scourge of our sport. Bill says 'handicaps are an essential part of our racing'. Why? Who are they essential for? Owners, trainers, racing fans, punters, or bookmakers? No doubt they increase profit margins for bookmakers and that is why bookies have done so much, for so long, to promote large-field handicaps. But, as highlighted at the end of Geoff Greetham's letter, it can be demonstrated that betting turnover is often higher on non-handicap racing.

Geoff says that James Willoughby's proposal goes too far and he advocates an 'alternative to the bloated diet of low and middle-grade handicaps for these

horses (for horses 6yo and upwards), which he says helps to keep more horses in training for longer, should be expanded. More handicaps and, dare I say, handicaps for horses which are recognised as being beyond their peak and unable to compete against younger horses. What would this do for the overall standing of British racing?

Bill O'Gorman has been advocating optional claiming races for decades and has proposed it to numerous racing administrators over the years. I have also put his proposal forward on many occasions but, sadly, the BHA have never been able to grasp the basic principles.

Their own version of optional claimers misses the point and has failed to offer any of the advantages that Bill

envisages. And, it has to be said, that we would require a sea change in attitude to claiming races among British owners and trainers which is unlikely to come easily. In the last 30 years we have been going the other way, with fewer and fewer selling and claiming races in the programme.

FOR me, the most telling letters came from the non-professionals David White, an owner for many years, and Christine Murphy, a racing fan who has never owned any part of a horse or held any role in the industry. They can both see that there should be a system of promotion and relegation through leagues or classes. Add to this James Willoughby's principle that you need to have incentives for moving up in grade and you have the basis of a system. The principles are there for all to see in football, the most popular spectator sport in the world.

THE HORSES In Training book, now published by Pitch Publications on behalf of the Racing Post, hit the bookshelves on March 20. Its appearance is usually followed soon afterwards by an article in the *Racing Post* on the size and composition of trainers' strings. So far, I haven't seen anything written on the subject this year but maybe I have missed it.

In any event, it is impossible to glean much of interest from any attempt at analysis of the strings as published in this book. With the best will in the world it is impossible for trainers to be accurate about their submissions as horses come and go throughout the year for various reasons and, for many now, the new craze of employing pre-trainers means that many horses will not be in their trainer's yard in January when the details are submitted. Add to this the fact that there has always been a bit of a stigma attached to having too small, or too big, a string and you will find that there might be a bit of editorial licence applied by some trainers.

SIZING THE STRINGS

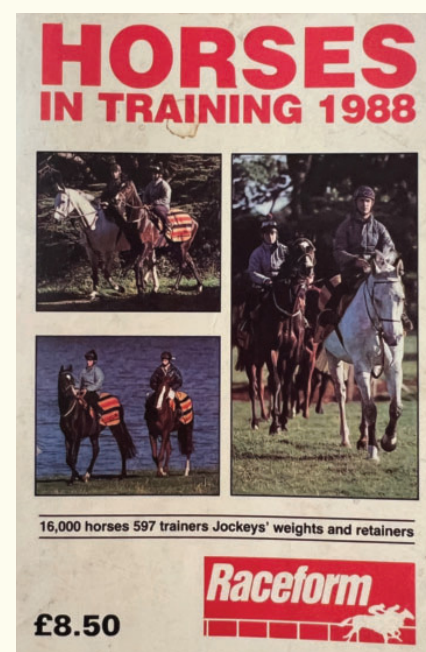
I have been at both ends of the scale and I know that in my earliest days I would be trying to think of every horse that might come in, or that could be considered only to be absent on a temporary basis, to include in it on my list.

I am now – perhaps, for obvious reasons – not one of those that would advocate the limiting of trainers' teams. I have learned that there are countless advantages, including for the individual horses, in having a big team. Nonetheless, there are still many who try to downplay the size of

their team and this adds to the inaccuracy of the *Horses In Training* publication.

For the facts and figures fanatics, details of the number of individual starters from a yard can be a much more interesting statistic, but it still fails to offer a clear indication of the strength of a team. There is a great variation in the percentage of individuals that trainers might run, with those who train for the big owner-breeders perhaps being less inclined to run horses that have shown little ability at home.

We, as I have explained many times before, are at the end of the spectrum where we tend to run a very high percentage of the individuals that come to us. If they are sound and fit to run, we will generally give them a go, regardless of what they have shown at home, as the majority of our owners want runners and want to see for themselves what their horse can do on the track. Consequently, our number of individual runners and our *Horses In Training* list would generally be good indicators of the strength of our team. The fact that we break most of our own yearlings and have very few coming from



The 1988 *Horses In Training* annual which featured for the first time a new young trainer, one Mark Johnston

pre-trainers would also mean that our list when published is pretty accurate.

I would imagine that jump trainers would be more inclined to run every

individual, where possible, but, nonetheless, I was amazed when it was pointed out to me that Gordon Elliott has run 347 individual horses this season.

Unfortunately, his string is not included in the *Horses In Training* book so we can't get any indication of how many might be in the yard at any one time.